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The Definitive Account of Early Mediumship

A review of The Heyday of Mental Mediumship: 1880s-1930s: Investigators, Mediums and Communicators, by Alan Gauld.

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The Definitive Account of Early Mediumship

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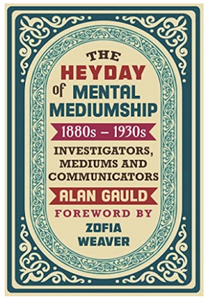

A review of *The Heyday of Mental Mediumship: 1880s-1930s: Investigators, Mediums and Communicators*, by Alan Gauld. White Crow Books, 2022. Pp. xiii + 324, $21.99 (Paperback). ISBN 978-1-78677-185-8

Abstract: Following his acclaimed earlier study on mediumship and survival, Alan Gauld provides a more complete account of about 50 years of early studies on mediumship with a select group of mediums (e.g., Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Leonard, Mrs. Dowden). He describes in detail why many if not most of the criticisms against extraordinarily accurate accounts by these mediums do not hold water when analyzed in detail. Gauld does not provide easy answers, but in his masterwork does something much more important by offering a justification to those who may want to base their belief of potential survival on empirically defensible grounds.

First, a warning to potential readers of Alan Gauld's superb new book: Stop reading it as you approach your train or bus stop or you might miss it (I know whereof I speak). His previous book (Gauld, 1982) of early mediumship has been the source of authoritative, eminently reasonable, and non-dogmatic source of what the early trance (or mental) mediumship, studied mostly by the Society for Psychical Research, suggested about the possibility of survival. I will no longer recommend that book as the first choice because Gauld's new book surpasses it by going into greater detail and more thorough argumentation, demolishing on the way ignorant, nonsensical, and dogmatic critiques. *Heyday* is circumscribed to research on mental mediumship in the UK and the USA during a period of about 50 years. It does not cover other areas that have been proposed as germane to a discussion of survival, such as apparitions or physical manifestation mediumship (e. g., Fontana, 2005), nor does it cover mediumship in other countries (e. g., Rocha et al., 2014). This lack of breadth, though, is justified by the depth of analysis.

Guided by Gauld, we enter the séance rooms with dedicated, brilliant, and astute researchers to clarify what happened many decades ago, which is not only intrinsically interesting but offers methodological and theoretical lessons that have much to offer to the present. I will revisit that point at the end of this review so let me start with one of the first shocks along the way.

On May 4, 1887, the then-agnostic psychical researcher Richard Hodgson, who had been investigating mediums and psychics suspected of fraud (most famously the Theosophist Madame Blavatsky, see Gurney et al., 1885) anonymously sits with the medium Mrs. Piper. He makes copious notes about what Piper's "control" (i. e., the purported intermediary between a medium and the dead) Phinuit tells him. It includes the mention of a "Fred" who went to school with Hodgson, was remarkable at jumping frog, and had convulsions before his death. The mind of the Australian debunker must have stopped in its tracks (or midstream, if one uses William James's metaphor) at this recondite information of his childhood in another continent. And those were not the only accurate facts that Mrs. Piper conveyed to Hodgson, who became convinced of her extraordinary abilities (as did William James and the cautious and meticulous Helen Sidgwick).

Heyday has many other examples of Mrs. Piper's (or her *controls* if you will) uncanny ability to offer accurate information that even the sitter did not know at the time, or to stand-in or proxy sitters that did not know the person for whom the reading was intended and thus could not have provided useful information to the medium. She even, a few times, correctly stated what someone else was doing at the time at another location, or

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what that person would do in the future. Mrs. Piper, although probably the best known and studied medium, was not the only one who communicated information that she seemingly could not have known through ordinary means and in controlled settings that minimized the possibility of any information obtained before or at the time. To give but two other examples described at length by Gauld, in a well-documented session Mrs. Dowden mentioned correctly at least seven names or nicknames known to the sitter but not to the medium (p. 253). And Mrs. Leonard's delightful control Feda (for an extant recording of her voice see Fischer & Knoefel, 2007), in six sessions with at times a proxy sitter, provided very precise information. The sessions scores were: a: 13 out of 13 correct statements; b: 6 out of 6; c: 9 our of 10 with the remaining unverifiable; d: 11 out of 11; e: 4 out of 4; f: 3 out of 4 with the remaining inconclusive (pp. 266-269), giving accurate readings that clearly applied to that person and likely to few others if any.

Were all mediums as accurate as the instances just mentioned, there would not be a controversy about mediumship and we would all consult mediums regularly, but another of Gauld's great strengths is his completeness and fairness in covering the often very extensive records. He gives many examples of the many instances in which the mediums were absolutely wrong or, at least, partially wrong, and/or were grasping at straws. Psi-deniers may use these instances to avoid dealing with the accurate instances, but, in my view, this is as nonsensical as it would be to deny the existence of poetry because even very good poets (a very select lot, of course, maybe as rare as good mediums) cannot produce good poems on demand. Consider the following quotation by the poet and critic Randall Jarrell (1953): "How necessary it is to think of the poet as somebody who has prepared himself to be visited by a dæmon, as a sort of accident-prone worker to whom poems happen… A good poet is someone who manages, in a lifetime of standing out in thunderstorms, to be struck by lightning five or six times; a dozen or two dozen times and he is great" (p. 136). This description of poetry could describe as well how manifestations of putative psi, often related to important emotional events, are experienced by most of us as events happening rather than being under our control.

One of Gauld's many strengths is that he discusses alternative explanations to that of anomalous cognition for extraordinary readings (including fraud, "cold reading," information that Mrs. Piper might have known at one point and forgot, and so on) and proceeds to dismantle them as *adhoccery,* a term he uses for hypotheses that lack any plausible evidence but are offered in order to safeguard a theory, sometimes, to use one of his memorable phrases, "prancing in the borders of Cloud Cuckoo Land" (p. 25). Gauld argues against the assumption that anomalous cognition, whether originating in the living (i. e., living agent psi or LAP, or "superpsi", typically attributed to the mediums themselves) or the dead (survival) is impossible and should not even be entertained as a hypothesis to be evaluated. I can offer the recent example of two psi-deniers (they cannot be called skeptics because they already *know* with certainty) who refused to even consider the methods or results of more than 10 meta-analyses supportive of psi cognition in a paper they criticized (Reber & Alcock, 2019; for two of various refutations of their arguments see Cardeña, 2019; Williams, 2019).

One lesson from *Heyday* is that it is important for theoretical and practical reasons to investigate under what circumstances good mediums are more -and less- likely to produce accurate information (for instance, Mrs. Piper's ability declined with age and perhaps with difficult life situations, much as it happens with geniuses in mathematics, literature, etc.). A variety of methodological, theoretical, and even cultural points are mentioned or can be derived from *Heyday* to explain why earlier research provided more impressive supportive evidence of anomalous cognition than seems to be the case now (an observation mentioned repeatedly by Gauld).

A strong possibility, in my view, is that methodological practices that have come to dominate since the original SPR investigations may discourage the manifestation of *bona fide* mediumship. Although psi critics may claim that these changes just entail scientific progress, they may also have unfortunate consequences. For instance, an important change since the period studied by Gauld has been the questionable central role given to quantification of group data and related statistical inference in the behavioral sciences (e.g., Acree, 2021; Bakan, 1969). It should be mentioned, however, that parapsychology/psychical research, even in the early study of mediumship, developed ingenious mathematical analyses (e.g., Sidgwick, 1922), and the field has continued to produce methodological and topical innovations (Hövelmann, 2015). *Heyday* describes how analyses conducted by W. F. Prince and John Thomas resulted in astronomical odds against chance that accurate items in mediumistic readings would apply to other individuals; those original data and analyses deserve being revisited by contemporary statisticians. Furthermore, some early investigation practices are fortunately gone (e. g., exposing Mrs. Piper, unexpectedly, and without informed consent, to nocive stimuli), and current mediums/psychics are not likely to be willing to have their lives as controlled by investigators as happened earlier.

Although statistical analyses continue to support the validity of anomalous cognition during mediumistic readings (e.g., Beischel & Zingrone, 2015; Sarraf et al., 2020), in my view a change that has impoverished mediumship research is the neglect of longitudinal case studies in the context in which putative valid phenomena occur. Witness the thorough development of research procedures in collaboration with mediums depicted in *Heyday,* and compare it with the short-term relationships with mediums during a typical experiment. The field needs long follow-ups of promising genuine mediums, tracing when and under what circumstances they perform better. Developing a long-term relationship would give the researcher a "feeling for the medium," or, to quote Nobel prizewinner geneticist Barbara McClintock about maize, "No two plants are exactly alike. They're all different, and as a consequence, you have to know that difference. I start with the seedling, and I don't want to leave it. I don't feel I really know the story if I don't watch the plant all the way along" (McClintock, in Keller, 1983). New theoretical, methodological, and statistical approaches centered on the person (cf. Bergman & Lundh, 2015) offer potential tools to the mediumship researcher. Relatedly, Simmonds-Moore (2022) has proposed that investigations should not exclusively or perhaps even primarily center on absolute control of variables but also embrace relational, meaningful, and participatory approaches. In support of her position, a recent paper concluded that aspects common to most studies mentioned in *Heyday,* such as selecting mediums with demonstrated putative ability, using motivated sitters, and giving some non-leading information to the mediums about the deceased were associated with more successful studies (Silva & Moreira-Almeida, 2022). Critics who propose that even just names in reading can explain away supportive results (e.g., Battista et al., 2015) should conduct their own studies and show that their proposals have empirical backing and are not just data-free speculations or, to quote Gauld, mere adhoccery.

I also think that another factor contributing to the success of some early mediums involved long procedures to alter their state of consciousness, whereas inducing a distinct state of consciousness (and not merely focusing inwardly) does not seem to be a common current practice among mediums/psychics/channels. To give but an example, Mrs. Piper's different states of consciousness throughout long sessions were described in detail by Eleanor Sidgwick (1915), and the medium's imperviousness to painful stimuli parallels cross-cultural observations of "trance" (for a review see Cardeña et al., 2023). Results from studies on ganzfeld, hypnosis, meditation, and psychedelic drugs support the contention that anomalous cognition may be more likely to occur during different states of consciousness (Cardeña et al., 2015). Thus, evidential

mediumship may require greater alterations of consciousness than seems to be the case in current practice. Furthermore, Gauld mentions that a cultural change that would make reductive materialism less potent, and the possibility of survival more, would strengthen the potential status of survival and psi. As an example, a survey of a representative population sample in Brazil showed that what is *very* unusual in that country is not to have had experiences of psi or survival , rather than the other way around (Monteiro de Barros et al. 2022). In countries or subcultures in which the default position is intense skepticism or even denial, it would be useful to note that many eminent scientists and other high-caliber intellectuals of the past and the present (Cardeña, 2014a,b) have supported research on the topic.

The final chapter of *Heyday* offers Gauld's summarizing thoughts. His conclusion has not changed substantially from his 1982 book, but in *Heyday* he develops it further. He mentions four theoretical explanations for the accurate information provided by mediums: a) LAP (living agent psi); b) actual psychic interactions with surviving spirits, c) the materialist perspective that posits that anomalous cognition from living or dead individuals is impossible by definition and discounts them *a priori* as random, fraudulent, and so on, and d) different agnostic approaches (p. 284). Gauld spends most of his discussion weighing the LAP versus survival hypotheses and concludes that there are many aspects- such as "drop in" cases of unsought apparently deceased communicators from people who had no acquaintance with the mediums or the persons consulting them- that are difficult to explain through LAP (e. g., the case of Mr. Rich described by Sir Oliver Lodge in a reading with Mrs. Piper; pp. 289-290). Gauld gives considerable weight, as Eleanor Sidgwick did, to the characteristic personality and the motivation implied in some communications, but at the same time he also criticizes survivalist assumptions that have little to no evidence to back them up (e.g., that even if survival of personality occurs it must occur to all people or for all time, p. 296), besides pointing out to the many inconsistencies in the information provided even by the best mediums.

What to make out all of this? Some years ago, as I became more familiar with the serious literature on the possibility of survival, including Gauld's 1982 book, my belief shifted from thinking that it was impossible to considering that the door of possibilities had opened slightly. *Heyday* has opened the door a bit more but refrains from supporting survival unequivocally as a certainty. The puzzle continues to have many missing pieces. The conclusion of John Thomas, cited approvingly by Gauld, can also sum his own thinking. After showing that ordinary explanations such as fraud are very implausible in the best cases, Thomas concluded that "The survivalist theory covers all the facts , but is not necessitated… because of the possibility of the alternative mind-reading explanation… irrespective of which way the balance may ultimately incline, the results of psychical research favor an interpretation of the universe that… affords all those who think that there are ultimate non-material values at the heart of things an increasingly broadening base of evidence" (Thomas, 1937, in Gauld, p. 281).

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Die definitive Darstellung der frühen Medialität

Etzel Cardeña

Zusammenfassung: Im Anschluss an seine wohlbekannte Studie (1982) über Medialität und Überleben liefert Alan Gauld eine noch umfassendere Darstellung der etwa 50 Jahre umfassenden Frühzeit von Studien über Medialität anhand einer ausgewählten Gruppe von Medien (z.B. Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Leonard, Mrs. Dowden). Er beschreibt eingehend, warum einige der Kritikpunkte gegen die außerordentlich genauen Berichte von Medien über Informationen, die sie nicht hätten wissen dürfen, bei genauerer Analyse nicht haltbar sind. Gauld gibt keine eingängigen Antworten, sondern leistet in seinem Meisterwerk etwas viel Wichtigeres, indem er denjenigen eine solide Rechtfertigung dafür bietet, dass ihr Glauben an ein mögliches Überleben auf empirischen und vernünftigen Gründen basieren könnte.

German translation: Eberhard Bauer

Relato Definitivo sobre a Mediunidade Primeva

Etzel Cardeña

Resumo: Dando continuidade a seu aclamado estudo (1982) sobre mediunidade e sobrevivência, Alan Gauld fornece um relato ainda mais completo de cerca de 50 anos dos primeiros estudos sobre mediunidade com um grupo seleto de médiuns (por exemplo, Sra. Piper, Sra. Leonard, Sra. Dowden). Ele descreve em detalhes por que algumas das críticas contra relatos extraordinariamente precisos de meios de informação que eles não deveriam saber não se sustentam quando analisadas em detalhes. Gauld não fornece respostas fáceis, mas em sua obra-prima faz algo muito mais importante ao oferecer justificativas sólidas para aqueles que podem fundamentar sua crença na sobrevivência potencial em bases empíricas e sensatas.

Portuguese translation: Antônio Lima

El Estudio Definitivo de la Mediumnidad Temprana

Etzel Cardeña

Resumen: Siguiendo su aclamado estudio anterior (1982) sobre mediumnidad y supervivencia, Alan Gauld proporciona un relato más completo de unos 50 años de estudios tempranos sobre mediumnidad con un grupo selecto de médiums (por ejemplo, la Sra. Piper, la Sra. Leonard, la Sra. Dowden). Describe en detalle por qué muchas, si no la mayoría, de las críticas contra los relatos extraordinariamente precisos de los médiums no se sostienen cuando se analizan en detalle. Gauld no ofrece respuestas fáciles, pero en su obra maestra hace algo mucho más importante al ofrecer una justificación a aquellos que quieran basar su creencia en una potencial supervivencia basados en argumentos empíricamente defensibles.

Spanish translation: Etzel Cardeña